A Socialist Workers Party pamphlet

ABORTION

Why Irish women must have the right to choose

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Contents

- Introduction 3
- The reality of abortion in Ireland 4
- Abortion - A woman's right to choose 6
- Abortion and disability 8
- Abortion - A class issue 10
- Reducing the abortion rate 11
- The fight to legalise abortion 13
- Is abortion dangerous? 15
- Who are the the anti-abortionists? 17
- The bad old 'good old days' 19
- The Catholic church 21
- A woman's right to choose to have children 23
- Women's liberation and socialism 24

Abortion: Why Irish women must have the right to choose
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Introduction

AT THE start of the 21st century, women in Ireland still do not have the right to control their own bodies. Yet the last twenty years have seen great change in women's lives and in attitudes to sexuality in Ireland.

Abortion is no longer a taboo subject. Radio talk shows have women phoning them, giving their names and openly talking about their experience of abortion. Much of this openness started only with the X case. In February 1992, the Attorney General in the South obtained an interim injunction restraining a 14 year old girl, pregnant as a result of rape, from obtaining an abortion in Britain. The injunction was confirmed by the High Court and Justice Declan Costello ruled that the girl and her parents were prohibited from leaving Ireland "for a period of nine months from the date thereof".

The newspapers leaked news of this "internment" of a 14-year-old rape victim. Up and down the country there was an explosion of anger and thousands of mainly young women and men poured onto the streets to say "let her go". Day after day, night after night, thousands of women and men took to the streets. This huge mobilisation forced the judiciary to do an about turn. The Supreme Court ruled not only that Ms X had the right to travel to England for abortions, but that she could have a right to abortion in Ireland if her life is endangered by the pregnancy, including if the risk to her life is from suicide.

The plight of Ms X, the 14 year old rape victim, made many people rethink their position on abortion. They started to wonder what they would think if they or their 14 year old daughter were in that situation. And they realised that they did not think the life of a foetus, still less a just fertilised egg, can be compared to that of an adult woman.

It is almost ten years since the Supreme Court ruling. However, there has been no move

to introduce legislation to implement the X ruling. As a result of the politician's cowardice, another young rape victim had to go to court to demand the right not to be forced to give birth to the child of a rapist. 13 year old Ms C, from the travelling community, was in the care of the Eastern Health Board and had to seek the court's permission to travel to England. She was granted permission and the Health Board paid for her termination.

Now once again Irish politicians led by the Fianna Fail leader Bertie Ahern are trying to roll back the X case judgement. They want a new referendum to stop women who are suicidal having a right to abortion. If a woman prefers suicide to bearing an unwanted child, let her commit suicide. This barbarism needs to be resisted by everyone who stands for women's rights.

In the North, there have been several similar court rulings that abortion should be available on the NHS to women who continuing the pregnancy would leave a "mental or physical wreck". Yet even women with serious medical problems cannot obtain a legal abortion in many hospitals in the North unless their very lives are in danger.

This pamphlet is a contribution to the abortion debate from a socialist viewpoint. It does not separate out the arguments around abortion from the rest of women's lives. It shows why the reality of women's sexual, working and family lives today mean that over 35 years or so of fertile sexual activity, many women will become pregnant in a situation where continuing the pregnancy is not an option. Abortion should be freely available in Ireland North and South on the Health Service at the woman's request. If women are to control their bodies, their lives, they must have the right to choose.

The reality of abortion in Ireland

ABORTION IS very much a reality of Irish life. Each year, about 10,000 Irish women travel to England to terminate unwanted pregnancies. Statistics collected by the English Department of Health show over 7,000 women from the South and about 2,000 from the North travel each year - that's over 150 women every week.

And the numbers are probably even higher since some women do not give their Irish address, either for fear of being found out at home or because they are not sure of their legal situation.

These women come from every age group from 12 to 55; they come from every walk of life - they are workers in factories, hospitals and offices; they are housewives, students

and unemployed. Almost half already have at least one child, some have grown-up families and don't want to start all over again; some feel they are too old, some that they're too young to have a baby, or another baby; some are afraid of losing or ruining their jobs, of being unable to finish their education, or of not being able to cope with other children. Some cannot afford or simply do not want another child.
In certain age groups (22-30 years old) an Irish woman is as likely to have an abortion as her English counterpart. More Irish women have abortions per head of population than Dutch or Danish women.

THE CASES of X, 14 years old and C, 13 years old, both pregnant as a result of rape and wanting to have abortions took the debate about abortion onto a new level. People who had voted in 1983 to put the anti-abortion amendment into the Constitution had to face the fact that they don't really think a woman's life is merely equal to that of the foetus she is carrying. In both the X and C cases, the widespread reaction was "of course she should be allowed have an abortion". In thinking this, people were agreeing that the rights of the young women should come before those of the foetus.

The X and C cases put precisely the argument on which the whole debate about abortion rests.
Do you think the rights of the woman, her life, her hopes, her education, her job, her mental health - perhaps her ability to cope with her other children - should be paramount? Or do you think, like SPUC, Youth Defence and other anti-abortionists, that even a six week foetus, still invisible to the naked eye, should have rights which over-ride those of the woman - that the woman should be forced to sacrifice her hopes, her future, the quality of life of the children she may already have, perhaps even her life in order to bring the foetus to full term?
Anti-abortionists say that women's lives are never endangered by the total prohibition on abortion in Southern Irish hospitals. The reality of the deaths caused by the lack of these abortions is covered up. Indeed, we are told the South has one of the lowest maternal mortality rates in the world. But then, we used to have one of the lowest suicide rates in the world until it was realised that doctors and coroners were covering up suicides because of Catholic Church rules about the burial of those who killed themselves.
So it is with the maternal mortality rates. Women who become pregnant while under a doctor's care for cancer or heart disease and who continue the pregnancy have their chances of survival greatly reduced. A pregnancy is likely to speed up the spread of any cancer and it will put additional pressure on a weakened heart. Only the most blinkered anti-abortionists deny this. In addition, the chances of the woman's body being able to do the work for the foetus to develop normally are greatly reduced. Whatever the out-

come of the pregnancy, the women die eventually of cancer or heart disease and that is what goes on their death certificate. The impact of the pregnancy is not recorded in the figures.

In the North, where abortion is illegal - except in very extreme circumstances - abortions are carried out for reasons of women's health. Anti-abortionists would have us believe that doctors in the North are wrong when they recognise that women's lives can be endangered or at least greatly shortened by some pregnancies. Just under one hundred abortions are carried out in the North because the woman's health is in 'grave danger'. Are we really supposed to believe that the kind of medical conditions that lead to these abortions never occur in the South? It is well known that doctors differ and patients die.

One of the patients who died was Sheila Hodgers. We know about her death because her husband, devastated with grief and anger, went public to warn other women.

Sheila Hodgers started drug treatment for cancer at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda, in 1981. Within a year, she became pregnant and was taken off the anti-cancer drugs. Three months later a tumour developed on her spine and she was told she would have to wait until the baby was born to get treatment for it. On St. Patrick's Day, 1983, Sheila Hodgers gave birth to a premature baby. Her baby died immediately and three days later Sheila died, riddled with cancer.

Because the Catholic Church forbids abortion except when it is certain that the foetus cannot survive under any circumstances, and most hospitals in the South of Ireland are controlled by the Catholic Church, there are probably many more Sheila Hodgers who have left children without a mother. That is the reality of the ethical codes followed by Irish hospitals that claim to protect equally the lives of both woman and 'child'.

Abortion - a woman's right to choose

Every single day in every part of the world where abortion remains illegal, women die trying to end pregnancies. The World Health Organisation estimates that, each year, 300,000 women die from backstreet abortions. Five women in the North have died since 1967, the most recent being Charlotte Hutton who died in Belfast in 1981. Every few months in the North, a woman is referred by hospital doctors to pregnancy counselling centres after injuring herself with knitting needles, or coat hangers while trying to abort the pregnancy.

So why do women go to such dangerous lengths to terminate pregnancies? The answer

OVER 10,000 protested for the right to choose during the X case

is that it is part of being human. One of the basic features which distinguishes human beings from animals is our ability to control and shape, not only the world about us, but also our own physical functions. If someone has a heart or a kidney that doesn't work, s/he can get a transplant. If our eyesight is poor, we wear spectacles, if we have diabetes, we take insulin. It is this control that makes us more than slaves to our biology. In keeping with this human trait, women have always tried to control their fertility, tried to take some control over how their own lives are going to be shaped. Abortion is part of that human activity.

As far back as the eighth century, when Ireland was allegedly known as 'the island of saints and scholars', abortion was an accepted method of birth control. The marriage law held abortion to be punishable only if the woman didn't have her husband's permission. The punishment was for wifely disobedience, not for the act of abortion. There is a story from this time about St. Brigid, who was known to help women with fertility problems. Brigid met a young girl who was distraught because she was pregnant. Brigid prayed with the girl, then put her hand on her stomach. Miraculously, the foetus disappeared.

Anti-abortionists say that if abortion were legalised, women would use it as an alternative form of contraception. That is nonsense. Women have more sense. They know it is far easier, physically and emotionally, not to become pregnant than it is to terminate a pregnancy.

Women don't take abortion lightly. For some, the decision to have an abortion is a difficult one. But given the choice between bearing an unwanted child and abortion, many women do choose abortion. They make this decision as an exercise in control of their own lives. Women controlling their lives is all very well, some say, but abortion affects the life of another human being.

Anti-abortionists argue that, from the moment of conception, the embryo or foetus, has all the genetic material a human being needs, that the colour of the eyes and hair are all pre-coded in the just-fertilised egg. Therefore, they argue, it is a human being with

rights equal to that of the woman. Of course the foetus is a potential human being, just as an acorn is a potential oak tree. All the genetic material an oak tree needs is in the acorn, the size of tree it is likely to become etc. is all pre-coded in the acorn. But the acorn is NOT an oak tree. And the foetus is NOT a human being.

Whether the potential for the foetus to become a human being is achieved depends entirely on the body of the woman carrying it. Only her body can nourish the foetus and turn it into a human being. The foetus can only continue to live if she lives, may not develop normally if she gets a virus in the early stages of pregnancy, will not be nourished if she does not eat, will not receive oxygen if she does not breathe, will die if she dies. It is totally dependent for its life on the use of her, and only her, body.

As for the woman, pregnancy means that her body is no longer her own. Women who used to hate milk start to drink it with relish while others who enjoyed nothing more than a pint of beer find all alcohol repellent. Drugs of all kind are forbidden, even life-saving chemotherapy has to be stopped. Even for a woman who greeted news of her pregnancy with joy, the extent to which her body is no longer her own can be disturbing.

This relationship between the woman and the foetus she is carrying is unique. It should not be forced on any woman. And precisely because it is a unique relationship, admitting the right of a pregnant woman to decide whether or not she will continue to give life to the foetus holds no threat to the rights of the terminally ill, the senile, severely disabled or otherwise dependent persons. For neither they nor anyone else has, or seeks, a 'right' remotely like the one that anti-abortionists talk about - the right to live inside the body of another against that person's will.

That is why we must put the woman, her life and her right to control her life, before the foetus. The humanity of the foetus is abstract and cannot be compared to that of a woman without devaluing her life, her relationships, her hopes and aspirations.

Abortion and Disability

IT MAY seem contradictory that socialists who fight for the rights of the disabled also support the right of a woman to abort a handicapped foetus.

But in capitalist society, the parents of a disabled child face a life of constant struggle to help the child develop to his or her full potential.

The parents are given no help in coming to terms with the grief of discovering that a child has severe disabilities. They have to fight for every scrap of information and for every form of treatment that might help.

In some parts of the country, both North and South, there are no physiotherapists, speech therapists or occupational therapists. Some parents of children with disabilities move to the Dublin or Belfast areas to get their children better treatment, only to discov-

er that things are only marginally better there.
Again, working class parents face the greatest problems obtaining information about, and treatment for, their child's condition.
Most working class people have neither the money nor the kind of job that allows them to move closer to specialist schools. They don't have the money to buy the equipment, computers etc. which can make such a difference to their child. And they have the constant worry about who will look after their child when they die.

IN THE summer of 1999, a group of parents of severely disabled children hit the headlines in Ireland. The Parent Future Planning Group (PFPG) called on would-be parents to have pre-natal tests for abnormalities, such as Down's Syndrome, and terminate pregnancies if any were discovered. The chair of the group is the mother of a severely physically and mentally disabled boy. She warned parents that, given the lack of support from the state, looking after children like her son is 'living hell'. She said on radio "if you know there is anything wrong, you should terminate the pregnancy before your own life is terminated". In reply to the objections of a 'pro-life' spokesperson, she replied 'the right to life does not end at birth' and said she would 'take my son with me' when she dies.

These parents are bringing up their children in a society that thinks it alright to have severely disabled adults living long-term in acute psychiatric wards.
Would you die happy knowing that's what was to be your child's future? As long as society puts profits before the needs of disabled people, the question of whether a woman should be allowed to abort a foetus that is handicapped is not simply a moral one.
It is a no-win situation for the parents.
At this time of grief, they have to decide whether to bring into the world a child whose life will be a constant struggle.
They have to consider their other children, any they already have or hope to have in the future. When everything is added up, many women decide to end the pregnancy.
The real grief faced by such couples is ignored by anti-abortionists whose moralistic insistence on ignoring the reality of people's lives only increases the pain of the families involved.
When society is organised to put the needs of people before profits, life for disabled people, and for the parents of disabled children, will be very different.
Few parents would feel the level of pain and anger at having a child with severe disabilities if they knew that s/he would get every chance in life; that the child would have hours of physiotherapy and speech therapy every day - not carried out by struggling parents but by qualified paramedics whose job it was; that creches would cater for children with special needs ensuring they got extra stimulation to develop their mental and physical abilities to the full.
In this situation, women would worry far, far less about having a severely disabled child because society, not the individual parent, would carry the extra burden of care.

Abortion - a class issue

THE HISTORY of abortion under capitalism has always been about class. Well-off women have always been able to get safe abortions in the clean beds of private clinics while working class women risked death with backstreet or self-induced abortions.

Right wingers only started to shout about abortions when working class women started to have safe abortions, too.

It is impossible to talk about abortion anywhere without talking about social class. The World Health Organisation estimates that 300,000 women die each year from backstreet abortion. Of these, not one comes from the ruling elite of even the most anti-abortion regimes - they simply hop on a jet and fly to somewhere they can get a legal, or at least safe, abortion.

In Ireland, North and South, rich women face few problems in getting to an abortion clinic in England. They have the money, no one is surprised at them heading off to London for a weekend, and they know their way around the airports and tube stations.

For working class women the lengths to which some have to go to get the money together, the lies they are forced to tell employers and family, can make the journey a distressing one.

Take the case of C, the 13 year old rape victim from the travelling community. It was the background she came from that meant her family couldn't just bring her off to England to have the pregnancy terminated. The child victim's whole life was exposed to full public view simply because her family were so poor.

In the North, the extent to which abortion is a class question is even clearer: if you have enough money or know the right people, you don't even have to travel. The majority of consultant obstetricians and gynaecologists in the North are willing to perform abortions under the provisions of the Abortion Act. The North has a number of private clinics providing medical care to the wealthy and some consultants use these clinics for private patients. There have been reports from individual nurses that some of the 'routine D&C' operations they have attended are, in fact, abortions. Money can buy you anything.

For working class women in the North, the difficulties are similar to those in the South. Getting £500-£600 together in a few weeks is difficult for all, impossible for some; most people know someone who has been forced to continue an unwanted pregnancy because they couldn't get the money together.

The class she comes from also has a huge effect on whether a woman faced with an unplanned pregnancy can consider continuing it. Well-off women know they have a decent house and enough money to be able to buy disposable nappies and convenience foods. They can employ a nanny (or even two as Cherie and Tony Blair did) to ensure

that their nights spent comforting a teething baby are someone else's concern.
A Child Poverty Action research study in Derry City found that over half of all lone parents missed more than two meals each week in order to put food in their children's stomachs. If you're living that close to the edge, another mouth to feed can be seen as a threat to the children you already have.

Reducing the abortion rate

EVERYONE SAYS that they want to reduce the number of Irish women having abortions. But any strategy to do this has to start from the reality of people's sexual lives today.
Governments have to accept that most people in any kind of steady relationship are having sex and that for most young people a night's partying is likely to include sex (or they hope it will!). So, the first thing needed is a decent, free and easily accessible contraceptive service.
The Women and Crisis Pregnancy research report suggests that the lack of decent contraception is to blame for many or most of the unwanted pregnancies terminated by Irish women in England. Only a third of the women with crisis pregnancies interviewed had been using a reliable form of contraception. Of these, fewer than 10% had been using the Pill, with a little more than 20% using condoms. When asked why they were not using a reliable contraceptive, there were three main answers: the prohibitive cost of contraception; lack of access to a family planning clinic; and fear of being thought of as a 'loose woman'.

THE pill is expensive

While contraception is free in the North, contraceptive advice and services must be paid for in the South by anyone without a medical card. This means that most young people and all students have to find 30 or 40 euros just to get a few months supply of the Pill. Even for women who have a decent enough job, the cost of a visit to a doctor and then the cost of a prescription puts the Pill beyond the reach of many. So, making all contraceptive services free on the health service, as they are in the North, is a first obvious step in reducing the number of abortions.
Many women, especially younger ones, said they didn't want to visit their family doctor about contraception. They were afraid that the doctor would disapprove or would tell

IRISH WOMEN still can't get easy access to information on abortion

their parents. In the smaller towns, there are no family planning clinics. Many can't afford to take the time off work or can't afford the cost of the trip to a clinic in a city, so they have to rely on other forms of birth control.

Women also said they wouldn't go on the Pill if they were not in a steady relationship. The reason being the attitudes to sex with which they had been brought up. 'If you're on the Pill, you're ready for sex' they said and they saw this as something to be ashamed of.

So, they tend to use the Pill only in a committed relationship. This view of women's sexuality belongs with the Magdalen Laundries in the 1950s, but it is still being peddled in the schools. The idea that 'nice girls don't', or that it's alright to 'get carried away' but not alright to acknowledge your sexuality and protect yourself, lies behind many of the unwanted pregnancies which end in abortion in England. A proper sex education programme which is open and explicit about sexual practices and contraception would certainly help reduce the number of abortions.

The Women and Crisis Pregnancy research showed condoms to be the most popular method of contraception. There were a number of reasons: they were relatively easy to access without anyone in authority knowing - they could be got as required from vending machines. Also, they don't require a visit to a doctor and the associated cost. Unfortunately, they don't work if they're not used and quite a few of the women interviewed for the research got pregnant because they 'got carried away' or had too much to drink and had unprotected sex. Also, condoms burst sometimes or slip off.

When condoms do burst or when someone has unprotected sex, the obvious next step is emergency contraception - 'the morning after pill'. The research found that many people don't know how to go about getting emergency contraception; this is understandable since family planning clinics are few and far between and no one knows what their GP's attitude is going to be. Some women think that they have to get emergency contraception literally the morning after. In fact, you have to take it within 72 hours of unprotected intercourse.

Again, the attitude of so-called pro-life people doesn't help. Anti-abortionists insist that the morning after pill is a form of abortion - which is nonsense. The result, however, is many Catholic GPs won't supply it. The fundamentalist attitudes of the anti-abortion

bigots cause many women to get pregnant when it could have been avoided. In the Western Health Board area of the North, for example, 63 percent of GPs refuse to supply the morning after pill for 'moral reasons'. Most hospital Accident and Emergency departments don't carry emergency contraception, although an unwanted pregnancy will have a much bigger effect on a woman's life than a sprained wrist. Providing the morning after pill free in the casualty department of all hospitals would go a long way towards reducing the number of abortions.

All in all, the research makes it clear that the best way to reduce abortions is to end church domination of the schools and have more openness about sex and sexuality. We know that most young people have had sex by the time they're 17 or 18. They don't see it as a big deal - and it needn't be if they take proper precautions. But that means changing attitudes towards young women being on the Pill or carrying condoms and it means having contraception, including the morning after pill, available free, on the health service everywhere on this island.

The fight to legalise abortion

THE LAW on abortion, North and South, is still the 1861 Offences Against the Person Act which makes abortion illegal under any circumstances, with a sentence of life imprisonment for those found guilty of having 'procured an abortion'.

But on both sides of the border, there have been a number of court judgements which make abortion legal under certain, limited circumstances.

In the South, the 1992 Supreme Court judgement in the X Case accepted that women who are suicidal have a right to abortion. In a three part referendum later that year, there was an overwhelming vote in favour of the right of women to travel for abortions, in favour of information on abortion being available and against a move to reverse the Supreme Court judgement. In short, people voted to make abortion available here for women who are suicidal because of an intolerable pregnancy.

These three referenda represented a major victory for pro-choice forces. However, while the pro-choice movement was strong enough to win the principle that abortion should be available in the South, it could not get it implemented in law and in the hospitals. Instead, the issue was thrown back into the laps of the politicians in the Dail. Ever since, they have dithered and delayed, fearful of angering right wingers in their own parties and in Irish society generally. The Labour Party in government went along with this hypocrisy.

If Bertie Ahern wins a new referendum on the subject, it will mean that virtually all possibility for abortions in Ireland will be closed off. While politicians concentrate on the

PROTESTERS demanding legislation in line with the X judgement

legalities of putting legislation into the Constitution, what the issue at stake in the referendum boils down to is whether abortion should be available here under ANY circumstances other than those approved by the Catholic Church, which is only when the woman's life is in immediate danger.

The 1983 Eighth Amendment to the Constitution says women have an equal right to life with a fertilised egg. The Supreme Court ruled in the X case that this amendment gives a suicidal woman the right to abortion in Ireland. Legislating for abortion when a woman is suicidal would mean standing up to the Bishops - and Fianna Fail have no intention of doing that. Instead, they want to force desperate women who cannot get to England to continue pregnancies that are the result of rape and incest - circumstances when we know most people think abortion should be available here. That is what a yes vote in this FIFTH referendum on abortion would mean.

The law in the North is also the 1861 Act, although it has been slightly amended by the British 1929 Infant Life (Preservation) Act which was extended to the North in 1945. It allows abortion 'for the purpose only of preserving the life of the mother'. Judges have ruled that the Bourne Judgement also applies to the North. In 1939, Dr. Alex Bourne carried out an abortion on a 14 year old girl, pregnant as a result of gang rape, and then invited prosecution. The judge not only legally agreed with him, he commended him for his action. This means that doctors can legally perform abortions if the woman is in danger of becoming 'a physical or mental wreck'.

Since 1993, there have been four cases brought in the courts in Northern Ireland in which judges have said that abortion should be available more easily. Like the X case in the South, each of the cases pushed the boundaries further. So, in the K case, that of a 13 year old girl in a children's home, pregnant by her boyfriend, the judge ruled that because she was threatening suicide she had the right to an abortion in the North. Despite the judgement, there was a fear that her mother, who hadn't seen K since she was five but appeared in court to declare her opposition to the abortion, would sue. So, doctors who are known to carry out abortions refused to operate on K, and she had to brought by social workers to a clinic in Liverpool.

The A case was that of a 24 year old mentally disabled woman, who had been raped. In this case, the judge said A had a right to an abortion, although she was not suicidal, because of the danger to her mental health. She got an abortion in the North. A third case was of a teenage rape victim who got her abortion in a Northern hospital.
The Northern judgements were unlike the X case in that they were not forced on the judges by a mass movement. In practical terms, there was no pro-choice campaign when the cases were being heard. So, although the judgements were more progressive than the X judgement, they did not have the same effect on attitudes or on the fight to legalise abortion.

Is abortion dangerous?

ANTI-ABORTIONISTS PRESENT abortion as a dangerous operation, with long-term physical and psychological effects. This is nonsense. The law in England only allows abortion if there is danger to the woman's life or health from continuing the pregnancy.
The reason abortion is available virtually on demand there up to 12 or 14 weeks is that at that stage, it is always safer to have an abortion than to give birth.
Anti-abortionists try to frighten women by talking about sterility and frequent miscarriages in later life due to the stretching of the cervix during abortions. This is scaremongering. Ninety percent of abortions in England are carried out before fourteen weeks. At this stage, the cervix is stretched less than it is in a D&C - the method by which many young women in Ireland are treated for painful and irregular periods.
There are, of course, risks involved in abortion, just like any surgery. But in early abortion these are very slight - like those many women have after giving birth and are almost never serious - provided you follow your doctor's instructions.
With more and more women having very early abortions, a local anaesthetic is all that is needed, although many women still choose a general anaesthetic. In early abortion, all that is required to extract the pregnancy is a simple syringe. Even the vacuum pump used in the past isn't necessary. However, Irish women are not allowed to have the operation until the seventh week of pregnancy and there is no point in travelling before then. This is because until seven weeks gestation, the embryonic sac is so small the doctor cannot be sure it has been removed from the womb. Even at 7-9 weeks, what is extracted from the womb is mainly blood, which has to be rinsed - often several times - before the embryo can be seen. It looks just like a heavy period.
These days, more and more abortions in Britain are medical rather than surgical. Women in Britain are able to use RU486, a simple drug which is also used to treat endometriosis and cancer of the breast and uterus. The woman, who has to be less

than eight weeks pregnant, simply has to swallow some tablets and then return to her doctor some time later for a prostaglandin pessary. The RU486 loosens the lining of the womb and then the prostaglandin starts contractions, bringing on what seems like a very heavy period. Irish women are unable to avail of this method of abortion, as it is only given to women who have are registered with a local GP. Women who used to live in England and who can spend a week there can get a medical abortion by returning to their old GP.

While some women are able to go immediately and have an early abortion, the fact that it costs so much means that many end up having later abortions than they would like. It costs £300-£350 sterling for the operation in a non-profit making clinic plus £150 or so for travel. For many working class women, this takes weeks of planning and scheming. British government statistics show women from Northern Ireland are likely to be considerably later on in their pregnancies than their English counterparts: in fact, they are three times more likely to have an abortion after 20 weeks. There is no reason to believe that women from the South are any earlier getting to England. This is the real danger to women's health - the later abortions - not the very early abortions that any woman would prefer.

Neither are reports of inevitable depression following abortion founded in fact. 'Post Abortion Syndrome' was first written about by anti-abortion psychiatrists in the United States in 1987. The media quickly took up this new 'fact'. President Ronald Reagan ordered his top public health official, Surgeon-General C. Everett Koop, to prepare a 'comprehensive report' on the impact of abortion on women's health. His brief was to establish the existence of the 'syndrome'.

Koop who, like Reagan, was a fervent anti-abortionist duly reviewed more than 250 published research articles. He then declined to issue a report at all, saying that 'the scientific studies do not provide conclusive data on the effects of abortion on women'. Eventually, in 1989, a Congressional committee compelled Koop to release his report and ordered him to testify. Koop told the committee that the problem of adverse psychological effects on women was 'minuscule from a public health perspective.'

Most women do go through a 'weepy' period in the days immediately after an abortion, as their hormones get back to normal. These are the same kind of 'blues' that most women have 3-5 days after having given birth. However, in the longer term, the vast majority of women having abortions do not suffer depression. Indeed, the feeling most often expressed is relief. Even Dr. Patricia Casey, the leading anti-abortion psychiatrist in the South, says that about 10% of women who have abortions suffer what she calls 'post abortion syndrome'. This, as she points out, is the same proportion of women who suffer post natal depression. Every objective study shows that when women did suffer depression, it was because of external reasons - job, family, money, rejection by their boyfriend, reasons which had perhaps forced them into abortion.

Many women have ambivalent feelings about ending a pregnancy, particularly when they were brought up to be anti-abortion. Anyone who feels they need help to come to terms with an abortion should talk to supportive friends or contact the Family Planning Association or their local Well Woman Centre. North and South, these provide one to

one counselling and post-abortion support groups. However, it is important to be sure the group is pro-choice: anti-abortion 'Women Hurt by Abortion' groups see the first step to 'healing' as admitting you 'killed a baby'.

Who are the anti-abortionists?

SPUC (IRELAND)

THE SOCIETY for the Protection of the Unborn Child, is the best known and largest of the anti-abortion groups. SPUC was established in Britain in 1967 specifically to fight the new Abortion Act.

Other SPUC organisations operate in countries where abortion is legal. Ireland is in the unique situation of having anti-abortionists but no legal abortion. Why? Because these groups found that they could use the abortion issue to fight the liberalisation of Irish society. They don't only want to stop the clock, they want to turn it back.

While focussing on abortion they usually manage to include as 'part of the abortion trend' sex education, homosexuality, contraception, divorce and sex outside marriage. They even attack Rape Crisis Centres as being 'sex-obsessed'. Bernadette Bonar, one of two Eastern Health Board members who tried to stop the 13 year old travelling girl from getting an abortion has consistently opposed the Health Board funding the Dublin Rape Crisis Centre. She has defended that stance by saying that the Centre has helped rape victims get abortions - so much for her 'concern' about rape victims!

SPUC (Ireland) was formed in July 1980, just days after a visit to Dublin by two of the leading figures of SPUC (UK). Both organisations have close links to like-minded bodies in the United States, from where much of the funding for anti-abortion groups comes, and where the idea of a 'Human Life Amendment' to the Constitution was first thought up.

The people behind SPUC are not simply ordinary citizens concerned with 'protecting the life of the unborn'. They believe moves to liberalise sexuality are part of an international conspiracy to subvert the Church, the family and private property. In the South, they have led campaigns against the Stay Safe programme in schools. Stay Safe, like Kidscape in the North, aims to help children protect themselves from abuse. Parents Against Stay Safe (PASS) see the programme as undermining the family and want to ban it from schools.

But for all their talk of rights for 'unborn children', anti-abortion activists are generally

opposed to the promotion of rights for children. They want a return to the traditional family where children are seen and not heard and where the parents can do what they want.

Kathleen McQuaid, a founder of SPUC in the North, wrote to the Irish News complaining about those who 'interfere in family life' by trying to outlaw the beating of children. The Irish Catholic carried a full page article warning that 'the children's rights movement threatens to undermine the freedom of parents to raise their children in their own way'. The article described the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child as 'the latest Trojan horse to breach the constitutional defences of world democracies'.

SPUC operates North and South while the Pro Life Amendment Campaign (PLAC) is confined to the South. It is led by doctors, lawyers, academics and businessmen. Since the 1980s, these have been revealed as members of secret right-wing Catholic organisations like the Knights of Columbanus and Opus Dei. Like the Freemasons, members of these groups help other members into top jobs and positions of influence.

The X case showed that there are SPUC supporters at high levels in Irish society. It was SPUCers in the Attorney General's office who organised the injunction to stop the 14 year old having an abortion. Subsequently, Judge O'Hanlon's statement that he believed a foetus should have the same rights from the moment of conception 'as a child already born' gave an indication of the influence of SPUC within the legal system. Rory O'Hanlon, a self-avowed member of Opus Dei was not just a High Court judge, but also the chair of the Law Reform Commission until the government was forced to sack him. Leading SPUCer and anti-divorce campaigner William Binchy is another member of the Law Reform Commission.

In the North, SPUC is led by mainly rural, right-wing Catholics and a few token Protestant fundamentalists. North and South, SPUC concentrates on pressurising politicians to ignore the reality of women's lives today. LIFE is probably the leading anti-abortion agency in the North and it tries to present the more "caring" side of the anti-abortion movement. It provides free pregnancy tests and hostels for pregnant women. However, their hostels have been criticised by women who have stayed in them as being repressive and totally out of date. For example, women complain that they are not allowed to see their boyfriends while they are in the hostel.

PRECIOUS LIFE, YOUTH DEFENCE AND THE MOTHER AND CHILD CAMPAIGN

AS WELL as the more 'respectable' anti-abortionists, there are groups like Human Life International Youth Defence and the Mother and Child Campaign from which SPUC tries to dissociate itself. These are the shock troops of the anti-abortion movement: they picket the clinics of TDs who are seen as 'suspect' on abortion and invade family planning clinics that provide information on abortion. Youth Defence have been involved in a number of violent incidents where their thugs have attacked and beaten up pro-choice campaigners. As the members of Youth Defence got older they transformed themselves into the Mother and Child Campaign, which opposes the latest referendum because it

allows the morning after pill.
In 1997, Youth Defence travelled to Belfast to help set up Precious Life, another extremist organisation. In return, members of Precious Life travelled to Dublin in early 1998 to join a Youth Defence occupation of the Marie Stopes Centre.
Youth Defence tried to establish itself as a mass youth movement in the aftermath of the X case. It argued that it, and not the tens of thousands who demonstrated in favour of Miss X's right to abortion, represented the views of young people in Ireland. Youth Defence's first march was ten thousand strong and led by not-so-young thugs. Socialist Worker called a counter-demonstration which confronted Youth Defence. 'Pro-life that's a lie, you don't care if women die!' focussed attention on the fact that Youth Defence would prefer Miss X to kill herself than open a chink to the availability of abortion here. Their next march was about 2,000 strong and, again, we counter-demonstrated; the next march had only a few hundred.
These days Youth Defence don't try to organise big marches.
When Youth Defence and Precious Life called a 'silent night vigil for the unborn' in Belfast on the Saturday before Christmas in 1997, they were able to turn out fewer than 300 people, despite having a big contingent from the South. The pro-choice counter-demonstration was greeted with smiles and 'thank-yous' by the women and men of Belfast. However the cowardice of the Blair government, in refusing to implement Labour Party policy and extend the 1967 Abortion Act, gave Precious Life a sense of confidence that saw them go on the offensive.
They adopted the tactics of Youth Defence and American anti-abortionists and started to picket the homes of pregnancy counsellors who worked with the Ulster Pregnancy Advisory Association. In July 1999, someone broke into the UPAA office in Belfast and set it on fire. Fearing that their own homes would be the next arson target, the counsellors decided to end their 20 odd years of work and closed the UPAA.
For the anti-choice bigots, the fight will not be won until they've silenced the voice of every woman who has had an abortion, the voice of every woman who believes she has the right to have one and the voices of the vast majority of Irish people who opinion polls show believe that abortion should be available, at least under certain circumstances. Even then, the fight will not be won for them until they have banned the morning after pill and many popular forms of contraception, including the low dose Pill and the IUD or coil.

The bad old 'good old days'

MOST PEOPLE in Ireland don't want to go back to the inhumanity and degradation that women faced in 50s, 60s and even 70s Ireland. Then, women had to stop working on getting married. Sexual relations, even within marriage, were

totally dominated by fear of pregnancy. 'My husband is a great man, he never touches me' was the boast of many working class women whose husbands loved them and knew of their fears about another mouth to feed.

If a working class woman became pregnant outside marriage, she had to leave her home in disgrace and go to one of the Magdalen Laundries or 'Good Shepherd' convents. Her parents had no choice but to turn her out. Parents who tried to stand by their daughters had the priest hammering at the door, telling them it was their Christian duty to turn their back on their child.

In recent years, the truth about the abuse of women and children in the Magdalen Laundries and in orphanages like Goldenbridge has been revealed. In Mike Milotte's book, Banished Babies, one woman described her two years in a mother and baby home in 1963 and 1964:

> ***"Someone always made a run for it but they were caught and dragged back or the Guards would be called and they'd go out and round them up....We were told we were privileged being in there...If we weren't in there we'd end up as prostitutes…We were bad girls, we'd had sex. We were shamed.....Six weeks after your baby was born they reckoned you were fit for work. Most of the girls were put out in the farm, working in the fields or the gardens or with the pigs and cattle. Or they were put to cleaning.***
>
> ***The work was hard and unpaid, a form of slave labour. The Magdalen Laundries provided laundry facilities not just for convents, churches and private individuals, but for hotels and hospitals as well. Many of the women were never to leave; they spent their whole lives working for the nuns without ever receiving a penny in wages".***

The nuns, with the collusion of the state, even sold the babies these women were forced to give up for adoption. Pat told Mike Milotte about the American couples who came to the home looking for a baby to adopt and her own heartbreak when her son was taken from her to be adopted:

> ***"They had to be physically perfect, and none of the black babies that were there were ever selected...He was 20 months old.....I remember so clearly, bringing him down to the side door, hugging him, cuddling him and kissing him, and he was just swiped out of my arms by a nun...That was the last I saw of him".***

Pat's son was one of the children sent to America and he died before she was able to find him after the truth came out in 1996.

These offences didn't happen in the dim and distant past. Right up to the 70s, children in the Goldenbridge orphanage in Dublin were still being tied to potties and physically punished for minor 'offences'.

This is the kind of Ireland to which the anti-abortionists want to return: where women and children were seen and hurt, but not protected and heard.

The Catholic Church

BEHIND ALL the anti-abortion groups stands the power, influence and money of the Catholic Church. Their control over education has played an important role in ensuring that abortion is seen as a moral issue, not a political issue. Children at school are shown lurid films such as Diary of the Unborn Child and photographs of bloody foetuses and given sentimental prayers and poems. Abortion kills children, they are told.

But foetuses and embryos are incapable of conscious thought, still less of writing a diary. So why does the Church invest them with such attributes?

There are two reasons: the soul and politics. The soul is important because according to current Catholic teaching, the soul enters the body at the moment of conception. Because it has a soul, the just-fertilised egg, embryo or foetus is, to the Church, as much a human being as the adult woman who carries it: so, abortion at any stage is murder.

The Church hierarchy's insistence on putting the 'soul' of the foetus before the life and happiness of the woman is most obvious when the woman is carrying an anacephalic foetus, that is a foetus without any brain. Most of these will be still-born, a few will live a few hours - none longer than 36 hours. Women now discover this tragic fact at five months of pregnancy. Yet in the South, because of the Church's domination of hospital ethics committees, these women are forced to carry the pregnancy to full term and go through the pain of labour. The possibility of baptism at the moment of birth 'justifies' the lack of medical intervention.

Most fertilised eggs never get to be babies - 'nature' or 'God' discards them before birth. Well over half do not implant and are washed away in a normal menstrual period. Up to a further quarter are implanted but are lost in early miscarriage, often before the woman even realises she is pregnant. Of the fewer than 25 percent of fertilised eggs that become established pregnancies, a further proportion will be lost through spontaneous miscarriage. Those who believe that a foetus is a full person from the moment of conception have to face the fact that 'God' or 'nature' is responsible for the greatest number of abortions!

The Catholic Church did not always condemn abortion totally. St. Thomas Aquinas argued that the soul entered the body at 40 days of pregnancy in the case of a male foetus, 80 days in the case of a female. Until this moment of 'ensoulment', abortion was not a sin. Prior to the last century, it was widely accepted that abortion was only a minor sin and in no way a crime until 'quickening' - when the woman first felt the foetus move. It was not until 1869 that the Church came out against abortion from the moment of conception.

Both Church and state allow killing in certain circumstances - self-defence, a 'just war'

ARCHBISHOP McQuaid and DeValera built a reactionary state

(even the killings of non-combatants) and capital punishment. But while the Church and state justify beforehand any policeman who kills in self-defence, any soldier who kills in a war situation, any government that hangs the wrong person (or shoots them down in the street), both condemn beforehand any woman who has an abortion.

This hypocrisy was exposed clearly in Pope John Paul II's approach to the question of the deadly nuclear cruise missiles. In the 1980s, many bishops and cardinals pleaded with the Pope to speak out against Ronald Reagan's escalation of the arms race. But at no point during the Reagan years did the Pope speak out against any policy of the United States government. A US Under Secretary of State at the time stated that 'had the Pope gotten up one Sunday and said we don't want these missiles in Europe, we probably could not have those missiles'.

Most remarkably, the Pope supported Reagan's policies in South America, even Nicaragua where US-backed Contras were killing Catholics. A Channel Four programme showed footage of Reagan having an audience with the Pope. Journalists were pushing for an answer on whether the Pope was trying to get Reagan to accept the need for a nuclear arms control agreement. The Pope dodged the question repeatedly and finally, obviously annoyed, answered: 'I am convinced that it is necessary to respect also the secrets of each person'.

The hypocrisy of this statement is breathtaking. Pope John Paul II never respected 'the secrets' of an individual woman who feels unable to continue an intolerable pregnancy. Yet he demanded respect for the secrets of a warmongering President who wanted to build even more weapons of mass destruction. It was alright for Reagan to control weapons which threaten the existence of the entire human race, but not alright for an individual woman to control her own body...

Hypocrisy is also evident in the Church's approach to the question of priests who sexually abuse children. Between 1993 and 1997, priests from dioceses including Dublin, Down and Connor, Dromore, Clogher, Ferns, Ossory, Armagh, Cork, Clonfert, Elphin, Galway, Raphoe and Tuam have been convicted of the sexual abuse, including rape, of children as young as eight years old.

In a number of these cases Church officials, having been made aware of the allega-

tions, acted not to protect the children and bring the culprit to book, but to protect the Church and let the guilty go free - often to abuse elsewhere. It seems to many confused Catholic parents that children are guaranteed the protection of the Church only until they're born and baptised.

Catholics for a Free Choice, an American organisation of priests, nuns and lay people who support a woman's right to choose argue that the Vatican's approach to abortion is political and not religious, that if a woman feels an abortion is the best option for her there is no theological reason why she should not have one.

Religion remains a powerful weapon for keeping the exploited in fear and subjection. The Church hierarchy is afraid that if women were to win the right to control over their own bodies, this struggle would be extended to the masses of people, women and men, controlling all aspects of their lives.

A Woman's Right to Choose to Have Children

SOCIALISTS SUPPORT the right to choose because we want greater freedom for people to control their lives. The right to choose means a right to both have an abortion - and a genuine right to have a child.

In Ireland the right of a woman to choose to have a child is greatly restricted by the lack of affordable childcare facilities, adequate paid maternity leave, decent housing and social welfare. State-funded childcare facilities are provided only for children who are known to be at risk of physical or sexual abuse. What little childcare is available is so expensive it is beyond the means of most low paid workers.

Richer women can sidestep all these issues. In the same way as money allows them the choice of having an abortion, so money allows them to have a child on their own terms. At every level, it is working class women who are least free to choose; and they can't even be sure that the few facilities they have will still be there tomorrow.

The reality is that those who call themselves 'pro-life' are only worried about unborn life. They cry about the 'millions of unborn children killed every year in abortion clinics' but take no interest in children who are already born. Right through the 1970s and 80s the UN released figures to show that 10 million children under the age of four die every year from malnutrition. In the 1990s, the number rose to 12 million every year. At the start of the 21st century, 14 million children a year were dying of malnutrition - still no word about them from the 'pro-life' lobby.

It is in the fight for a better world, where no mother has to watch her child starving to

death or dying of measles, that real concern for children is expressed. In general, those who support the right of women to contraception and abortion are more likely than 'pro-lifers' to be involved in that fight. The reason is simple. We are concerned, not with theological arguments about potential human beings, but with the rights and dignity of actual sentient human beings.

Women's Liberation and Socialism

UP TO recently, many thought that the 'liberal agenda' had already been won in Ireland and that conservative ideas about women would simply disappear under the influence of the European Union. The National Organisation of Women, formerly the Council for the Status of Women, and the Labour Party claim that it is membership of the EU which dragged Ireland into the twentieth century.

But the EU is not interested in forcing Irish society in any direction except towards a single economic market. It doesn't worry the EU bosses that women from Ireland have to travel to Britain to get abortions. It is perfectly happy to live with church domination of our schools and hospitals.

In October 2000, for example, Justice Minister John O Donoghue threatened to use his veto at a meeting of the EU Council of Ministers, unless there were amendments to the Equality Directive to allow church run schools to insist that all teachers conform to "the ethos and beliefs of the school".

The Irish Catholic was fulsome in praise of O Donoghue's 'victory' in amending the directive explaining that 'It could have meant that, religion teachers apart, schools would be forced to employ openly declared atheists, gay activists, and others whose views or lifestyle were obviously contrary to the ethos of their employer.' The Irish state, by the way, pays the wages of the teachers - not the Bishops. But the EU still presided over a situation whereby atheists and gay people are discriminated against.

The European Court ruled against the right of Irish women to information about abortion except where the information was about goods or services. Again, it was only the mass action on the streets over the X case that gave women the right to information.

One of the most widely quoted examples of the EU supposedly advancing women's rights is in relation to equal pay. It is true that the EU forced the introduction of equal pay legislation. But every government statistic shows that, on average, women still earn only two-thirds of men's wages.

North and South, 20 years after the Equal Pay Acts, an average woman has to work 50

THE success of a revolution depends on how much women take part in it

percent longer to achieve the same level of income as her male co-worker. Where women have won equal pay for work of equal value, it has been as the result of fighting for it - usually with the support of the men they work with.

The idea of women, or men, having control over their own lives is not compatible with global capitalism. It's theoretically possible to have free abortion on demand. It's theoretically possible for the capitalist state to provide full child care facilities. But as long as the economic system puts profits before people, such facilities will only be provided in so far as they suit the needs of the economy, not as a means towards the liberation of women.

It follows that the fight for women's liberation is best expressed as part of the fight against capitalism.

This doesn't mean that socialists can do nothing now to win women's rights. Every fight for reform is important, both because women's lives can be made a little easier and because the overall confidence of the working class is improved through real struggles for new gains.

Socialists emphasise the need to fight for change from below. We don't agree that somebody else can give you your freedom - whether it's left-wing TDs or guerilla armies or the EU. When people take to the streets to demand change, they change themselves in the process.

In the X case, mass action, not quiet lobbying or polite petitioning, brought the first major defeat for the bishops and the bigots since the foundation of the Southern state. And it is mass action that is needed now to advance women's rights and the rights of working people generally in Ireland, North and South.

This is demonstrated by the lack of progress on abortion rights in the North, despite three High Court judgements which ruled abortion should be available.

But the bigger problem is that as long as we live in a society which sees women as second class, we will have to fight to protect even the few rights that we do have. What is needed is a very different kind of society, where the mass of working class people, women and men, make for themselves the decisions that affect their lives - a society where people come before profits and where unemployment and poverty are unknown.

Under global capitalism, it is not particularly profitable to build houses, hospitals, crech-

es and nursery schools - so they are not built. But the building materials are available and there are construction workers ready to work on safe sites. Under workers' control, there would be no reason not to build thousands of childcare centres, hospitals and an adequate stock of good housing.

In a society which put people before profits, women having children would be seen as a real contribution to society (as the very 'productive' activity it is). And that contribution would be repaid not, as at present, by isolation and lack of support but in concrete ways which would allow women to enjoy bringing the next generation into the world. Every woman would have access to high quality 24 hour childcare so that she would be able to enjoy the freedom from the drudge aspects of parenthood that only the rich with their nannies do in this society.

The intimate relationship between women's liberation and socialism was best illustrated during the Russian revolution in 1917. For 30 years now, women in Ireland have been fighting for very basic rights like equal pay, abortion, child care facilities and so on. Yet many women's lives are still eked out in misery.

But in 1917 in the most backward country in Europe, revolution gave women rights which have not been achieved since anywhere in the world. Real equal pay was introduced in workplaces that were controlled by workers themselves. Foremen and bosses who had sexually harassed women workers before the revolution were beaten up by the women. Twenty-four hour nurseries and collective canteens and laundries were built to make society, and not the individual family, responsible for childcare and housework. Divorce was made cheap and simple. Homosexuality was legalised and abortion made legal and free on the health service. All in the space of three years.

Special efforts were made to ensure that women were involved in every aspect of the revolution on the grounds that, as Lenin explained it: 'the experience of all liberation movements has shown that the success of a revolution depends on how much the women take part in it'.

Just as women's rights advanced with the advance of workers' power, so were those rights lost when the workers lost power. When Stalin's counter-revolution killed the germ of socialism in Russia, women's rights began to wither and die.

To talk of socialism without women's liberation is meaningless. Equally, there can be no women's liberation without socialism. And control of fertility, our right to free contraception and abortion when we need it, is a prerequisite to women's liberation. It is for this reason that the abortion issue is not an 'optional extra' for the Irish Left, but a vital part of the struggle for workers' rights generally.

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Ten Years ago Ireland was convulsed with a massive political crisis. A 14 year old rape victim was prevented from traveling to Britain for an abortion by the state.

Tens of thousands flooded onto the streets demanding to "let her go." The massive outcry forced the Irish supreme court to reverse the decision and allow Miss X to travel to Britain..

This was a watershed in Irish politics. The domination of the Catholic church over the lives of Irish people and in particular over Irish women had suffered a body blow.

In the aftermath of the X-case homosexuality was also decriminalized and another referendum allowing divorce in the country was passed.

However, 10 years on, the cowardice and conservativism of Irish governments means that abortion is still banned in this country. Meanwhile 6000 women are forced to travel to Britain every year because of unwanted pregnancies.

In this updated edition of a pamphlet Gorretti Horgan explains why a woman's right to choose must be won if women are to play a full and equal role in our society.

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